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ABSTRACT

A program for preservice special education students at William Paterson College (New Jersey) offered participants field experience working with minority and disadvantaged students. Undergraduate students in their sophomore, junior, or senior classes spent one and two hours per week engaged in course assignments with pupils at the school under limited supervision from professors, teachers, and the school's leadership. The school was an inner city elementary school in a large urban system attended by students from more than 31 cultural, ethnic, and social groups. More than 90 percent of pupils received some form of extra assistance beyond the instruction provided in their classrooms. Both direct and unobtrusive measures are being piloted to respond to the question of whether increased exposure to diverse populations contributes to: increased comfort functioning in inner city settings; openness to teaching pupils from diverse backgrounds; increased professional self-confidence; and increased professional competence to create educational opportunities for students from diverse groups. Student comments indicated that their experience increased their comfort with inner city settings and opened their eyes to the realities and possibilities of such settings. However, influencing students' belief systems and documenting the nature and direction of these influences are more complex endeavors that often elude direct assessment. (JB)

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A "conversation topic" at the AACTE Annual Meeting
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Using Urban Settings to Prepare Preservice Special Educators to Assume Multiple Professional Roles

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Introduction

Special education teacher preparation programs are changing to equip new generations of educators to manage the increased student diversity that, predictably, will be reflected in their schools and classrooms. Sometimes the need is even greater, as when most of an institution's teacher candidates have limited experience with individuals from reference groups that differ from their own. The perpetuation of fears and biases from generation to generation, based on a lack of exposure, is not new. The idea is captured particularly well in a song from the show *South Pacific*, the message of which is "You've got to be taught before it's too late, before you are six or seven or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate . . ." Concern about perpetuating archaic beliefs among school personnel is seen in Cuban's (1989) comment that "children often fail because the culture of the school ignores or degrades their family and community backgrounds" (p. 781). Reinforced by similar issues identified in the professional literature, the department began to explore ways to increase preservice special educators' awareness of, exposure to, interaction with, and understanding of pupils from diverse cultural, ethnic and social groups. Programmatic adaptations are being piloted, in the form of expanded field experience options supported by didactic instruction, as ways to sensitize students to deviance and diversity. The focus on urban educational settings grew from a recognition that nowhere are these issues reflected more clearly than in urban settings. Further, since special education service delivery options are currently undergoing shifts as some districts embrace inclusive models, it is increasingly difficult to locate critical masses of special education settings in which to offer field experiences. As an alternative to the formalized special education programs, the urban setting described below has become a critical link through which theory and practice are merged.

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Setting

The inner city elementary K-8 school is part of a large urban system. Located close to the campus, in a primarily Latino section of the city, the school is attended by pupils who represent more than 31 cultural, ethnic, and social groups. School services include bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, basic skills instruction in reading, writing and mathematics, and two resource rooms serving classified pupils with learning or behavioral disabilities. More than 90% of the pupils receive some form of extra assistance, beyond the instruction provided in their classrooms. Further, at any time, at least 30% of the school's population may be found awaiting testing to receive more intensive instruction to support, augment or replace the instruction they currently receive. In this educational context, progressive educational leaders, teachers, staff and parents have welcomed the college students into their community. They have allowed them to fulfill a range of assignments which focus on the school's pupils, while participating in an array of educational experiences they most likely would not otherwise have.

Procedure

Students in one of their sophomore, junior and senior classes spend between one and two hours per week (between 20 and 25 hours over the course of the semester) engaged in course assignments with pupils at the school. Limited supervision is provided by the professor, teachers and the school's leadership. Both direct and unobtrusive measures are being piloted to respond to the following broad questions:

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Does increased exposure and interaction with diverse populations contribute to:

(a) increased comfort functioning in inner city settings?
(b) greater openness to teaching students from diverse references groups?
(c) increased professional self-confidence? and
(d) increased professional competence to create appropriate educational opportunities for students from diverse groups?

College Students' Reflections and Comments

While the prospect of providing professional practice experiences in urban settings seems fine in theory, required participation has elicited a wide range of reactions. The following are selected excerpts from the students' field journals. [Students are identified by sex, ethnicity, and age in brackets following each comment.]

On entering the school for the first time: "The outside of the school looked like most urban schools. Architecturally, it resembled a factory - grey and drab. On entering the building, however, my focus was diverted to the people who were warm and helpful and welcoming. And someone had thoughtfully put a window box filled with flowering plants under a window in the hall. What a nice touch!" [F, B, 26].

"As I entered, I saw people guarding the door and thought I would die!" The 'SIGN IN' process was intimidating! On the other hand, it made me feel safer, too." [F, C, 36].

"What's going to happen to me? my jewelry? my car!!" [F, C, 31].

"I felt that the school's principal and assistant principal were really glad to have us there." [M, H, 24].

Summary Comments: Selected journal excerpts capture a few of the students' more dramatic insights at the culmination of their field experiences.

"I reaffirmed for myself why I went into teaching. I've come to realize the urgency of good education, good teachers, and the need for extra supports for kids who face all the challenges of inner city life. I see my future career as being here. I feel drawn to the inner city and the children who live here." [F, H, 24].

"In the inner city, I have come across kids who were neglected, abused, emotionally disturbed and from dysfunctional families. The student with whom I worked came from a fine home that seemed stable and loving. He showed me a side of the inner city I'd not seen before ... the positive side. The biggest change I experienced was that I became more hopeful about possibilities for these kids." [M, C, 32].

"I have learned so much since that first day! I've learned that kids in the inner city have the same feelings, needs, and emotions as everyone else. They just happen to live in the inner city. I also became aware that these kids don't just have to overcome academic difficulties, they also have to deal with an impoverished environment, and many of the children have language differences which may cause additional problems." [F, C, 41].

Discussion

Not surprisingly, students' perceptions about the quality of their interactions with the teachers produced widely differing attitudes toward the field experience. Students who felt welcomed into the setting had the highest and most consistent attendance records, and were more likely to volunteer for additional assignments at the school. Those who reported negative interactions with a teacher early in the field experience rarely seemed to "recover." Instead, they tended to become increasingly negative as the semester progressed, and reported that the experience lessened their feelings of self-confidence about their teaching abilities.

Creating a continuum of increasingly demanding field opportunities through which preservice special educators have opportunities to expand their professional and personal knowledge and experience bases is a start. Influencing students' belief systems, and documenting the nature and direction of the influence, are far more complex endeavors that tends to illude direct assessment. While this pilot effort represents a positive first step, there are many issues still to be addressed.